Agents, not victims

Children play no part in creating social hierarchies, classes or castes. They are born into deeply unequal societies and live out their lives hampered (and, occasionally, aided) by societal perceptions, conventions and stereotypes. It is easy, therefore, to regard them simply as victims of forces beyond their control. But consider their motives and actions as migrants, and it becomes apparent that children also act as agents of their own destiny.

A teenager’s decision to migrate or seek work may be an empowering experience – an attempt to reach objectives or assert independence. Indeed, for all the dangers and difficulties children face, studies suggest that most perceive their migration as having been positive – even when their actual experiences have been negative. Many see migration as a step towards taking material responsibility for themselves and as an opportunity for superior education.

Work, too, can have an empowering effect, particularly if it provides vital resources for survival. While child labour is too often premature, exploitative, dangerous and abusive, it is important to recognize that, especially for older children, appropriate work can make a significant contribution to development by building self-esteem, teaching skills and helping children cope with poverty. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that children should have increasing autonomy, in line with their evolving capacities.

Children who migrate unaccompanied by adults are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and trafficking. Without support and protection networks, they may have particular difficulty coping emotionally. Similar predations may await children who, or who move with, refugees or internally displaced persons fleeing conflict or environmental distress.

More than half the world’s registered refugees live in urban areas. Some have official status, but many more lack the legal right to urban residence and may therefore be excluded from assistance. Women and children among these urban refugees and asylum seekers are at risk of harassment, exploitation, human trafficking and gender-based violence. Refugee and asylum-seeking children and adolescents, particularly those unaccompanied by adults, are especially vulnerable during the resettlement phase. Children born to migrant parents may end up stateless and unable to enjoy the rights of citizenship. Internally displaced persons may find themselves without economic resources and may be seen as competing with the urban poor for social services. For host communities, national governments and the international community, providing effective assistance is particularly challenging in such scenarios.

Children are affected by migration to cities even when they do not move. Many are left behind in rural areas in the care of a parent, relatives or community members. Such was the case with 55 million children in China in 2008. Being left behind can cause physical, educational and psychosocial distress. The damage is not inevitable, however. A 1998 study of primary school children of Filipino migrants suggests that, with sufficient care from the extended family, migration on the part of parents need not prove detrimental to child development, particularly when childcare training, counselling and other forms of support are provided.